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A SECOND CHAPTER CONCERNING THE DISCOVERY  
OF THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER BY DESOTO, IN  
TUNICA COUNTY, MISS.

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BY DR. DUNBAR ROWLAND

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A SECOND CHAPTER CONCERNING THE DISCOVERY  
OF THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER BY DE SOTO,  
IN TUNICA COUNTY, MISSISSIPPI.\*

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The Commercial-Appeal of March 18th contains an answer by Judge J. P. Young to my article on the discovery of the Mississippi River by DeSoto, which appeared in the same paper of February 18th, in which he attempts to establish the contention that De Soto discovered and crossed the Mississippi River at Memphis. The issue is made, and is based on historical evidence. I accept it with pleasure, not only on account of Judge Young's high character, great ability, and gentlemanly courtesy in controversy, but because I am convinced that a full and fair study of the evidence, as contained in the records made by eye-witnesses and participants, and of the opinions of the best historians, will establish the fact that De Soto discovered and crossed the Mississippi River within the 34th parallel in Tunica County, Mississippi, and not at Memphis, as contended by Judge Young. In making the claim for Tunica County, I unhesitatingly assume the burden of proof, which requires that my contention be established by a preponderance of the evidence. Let us carefully examine the original testimony.

THE BEST EVIDENCE.

In the article of February 18th, referred to above, it was stated that: "The best evidence of all the incidents connected with the De Soto expedition is, of course, the written statements made at the time by accurate and truthful men who accompanied it, and

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\* Rejoinder by the Editor.

such narratives only can be received by the conscientious and careful historian." The most reliable source of information is found in original records; the most unreliable source is tradition, which is nothing more than hearsay evidence. The acceptance of the first source and the rejection of the last is the distinguishing characteristic of the scientific historian. Judge Young applies these well known rules of evidence in the court over which he presides with learning, courtesy and dignity. If a litigant in his court, by his attorney, should attempt to introduce into the record of the case the same kind of hearsay and unsupported evidence which he introduces in support of his contention that De Soto discovered the Mississippi River at Memphis, it would be ruled out as soon as offered. I refer to his acceptance of authorities who wrote from hearsay and without special investigation.

What is the original record evidence in the question under discussion? Who made it, and when was it made? Did the authors making the records know the facts, and were they truthfully recorded? These are important questions in arriving at a correct conclusion. In my first article, in dealing with the narratives of the expedition which have come down to us, I stated that they were four in number, that the best and most reliable was the account of Rodrigo Ranjel, that the narrative of the Gentleman of Elvas was the longest and stood next in rank, that the account of Biedma was less reliable than the other two, and that the story of "The Inca" was unworthy of serious consideration, as it was founded on highly colored hearsay evidence.

That accounts of the expedition should contain descriptions of the country through which it passed, is natural and to be expected, as next to the presence of the Indians the topography of the country, its physical geography, flora, forests, streams, lakes, and high and low lands would attract the interest of the narrators. Such descriptions do occur in the narratives of Ranjel and Elvas. Since 1541 the Indians have gone, their towns and villages are no more, and the forests have given place to cultivated fields, but the topography of the country through which De Soto and his men passed is the same today as it was then; we have the same

character of country now; time has not changed the geological formations. North Mississippi from Pontotoc County, along the old Chickasaw Trail in a northwesterly direction to Chickasaw Bluffs, is the same hilly country today that it was in 1541, and West Mississippi, lying between the bluff formation which runs from Memphis to Satartia, Yazoo County, Miss., and the Mississippi River, is the same low country abounding in streams, lakes and slashes as it did when De Soto passed over it on his way westward to the river. The route of the great explorer is written indisputably in the topographical features described by Ranjel and Elvas. It is common knowledge that the counties of Pontotoc, Union, Marshall and De Soto, Mississippi, and Shelby County, Tennessee, through which the Chickasaw Trail ran, over which Judge Young contends that De Soto passed on his way to the Chickasaw Bluffs, is hilly throughout. Do Ranjel and Elvas describe the "vermilion hills" of North Mississippi, or the bottom lands of the Mississippi Delta? They say that from April 30th to May 8th, seven days, the expedition struggled through a wilderness of forests, marshes, lakes and sluggish streams. Can there be a reasonable doubt that the seven days preceding the discovery of the river, on May 8th, were passed in the low, marshy lands of the Mississippi Delta? Do the counties in North Mississippi, mentioned above, abound in lakes, basins, marshes and sluggish streams? Can the wildest stretch of the imagination lead us to believe that those seven days were spent on the well-trodden trail of the Chickasaws, on the high lands and ridges of those counties? It is not difficult to see why Judge Young touched so lightly on the topographical argument as given in my article of February 18th. Elvas and Ranjel described conditions existing in the section of Tunica County, between Coldwater River west to the Mississippi.

If the DeSoto expedition ever reached such a prominent point as the Chickasaw Bluffs, is it possible that the narratives would not mention such a height overlooking the great river? The fact that it was not mentioned seems conclusive that the place was never seen.

## EVIDENCE FROM MAPS.

In my former article it was stated that: "Not a map, so far as I know, gives Memphis the honor of being the point at which the Mississippi was discovered." This of course was a direct request for such evidence. It is fair to presume that inasmuch as Judge Young failed to name a map which supports his contention, the evidence is not available. Such evidence in support of my contention is abundant. Delisle's map has already been cited; in addition to that citation, I call attention to the map of Dr. Mitchell as given in "De Soto and Florida," by Barnard Shipp, Page 660; to that in Channing's "History of the United States," Vol. I., Page 73; to Vol. II., "Narratives of De Soto," at the title page, edited by Bourne; to "Spain in America," page 134, also by Bourne. These could be reinforced by many others, but it is not deemed necessary to give them, in the absence of evidence to the contrary. Next to facts obtained from first hand testimony, and the evidence given by the topography of the country, the facts gathered from maps are the most important and convincing. Geography is a science dealing with the earth and its life, and its findings of fact are most important in all historical investigations.

## JUDGE YOUNG'S AUTHORITIES.

In the preparation of his article, Judge Young evidently felt the weakness of his case from the standpoint of the evidence contained in the original narratives of the expedition, and of maps fixing the place of the discovery and passage of the river, and he seems to rely more on the secondary evidence in the case as contained in the work of commentators, who had never specially investigated the subject. In support of his contention, he quotes Bancroft, Shea, Ramsey, Claiborne, Keating and himself. Before quoting authorities in support of my contention, it may be best to deal with his citations. Bancroft is quoted as saying, that De Soto "crossed probably at the lowest Chickasaw Bluff, not far from the 35th parallel of latitude." That is certainly not putting it very strong. Bancroft also says, "The search for some

wealthy region was renewed; the caravan marched still further to the west. For seven days it struggled through a wilderness of forests and marshes; and at length came to Indian settlements in the vicinity of the Mississippi." The Judge is not happy in quoting Bancroft for several reasons. In the first place, the word, "probably" is not quite convincing; then he describes the Mississippi Delta and not the "vermilion hills" of North Mississippi; and says that the expedition "marched still further to the west," which is in conflict with the Judge's unqualified statement that the march was always to the northwest. Judge Young's greatest misfortune in quoting Bancroft lies in the fact that the eminent historian cites as authorities historians who disagree with him. He cites Belknap 1,—192 who says De Soto crossed the river within the thirty-fourth degree; Andrew Ellicott's Journal 125 which gives the crossing place as "Thirty-four degrees and ten minutes"; McCullah's Researches 526, "Twenty or thirty miles below the mouth of the Arkansas River." As Memphis lies well above the 35th parallel it is readily seen that the citations are against it. The same comment applies to John Gilmary Shea. The position of Claiborne is disposed of in that portion of this article which gives the topographical evidence. As Ramsey, the Tennessee historian, only conjectures that Memphis was the place of discovery and crossing, such a statement carries little weight. Col. J. M. Keating in his history of Memphis says that the Village of Chisca was on the river; this is in direct conflict with narratives and maps, and the same may be said of Young's History of Memphis. These are all the authorities quoted by Judge Young.

#### OTHER AND MORE AUTHENTIC AUTHORITIES.

While I do not attach the same importance to the opinions of commentators, (which is only secondary evidence) as I do to the primary sources of information such as the original narratives and topography, I am at the same time entirely willing to meet my worthy and learned friend in that field also, and I shall now cite certain eminent authorities whose findings are not in accord with the Memphis theory.

One of the first eminent historians who wrote the history of the Mississippi Valley was Dr. John W. Monette, and while his two-volume work, entitled "Monette's Valley of the Mississippi," was published in 1846, it has never been superseded as the standard work on the subjects with which it deals, by any later history. In treating of the subject under discussion, he says, (Vol. I., Page 47) "Much doubt and uncertainty has obtained as to the precise point at which De Soto reached the Mississippi. It was evidently much below the latitude of Memphis, where he was toiling four days in advancing twelve leagues up the river, and seven days in his westward march through swamps and deep forests, from the up-lands east of the Tallahatchee. At no point above Helena are the highlands, on the east side of the river, more than ten or fifteen miles distant. The point where De Soto crossed the river was probably within thirty miles of Helena. The changes of the channel in the lapse of three hundred years may have been such as to defy identification now." Harper's Encyclopedia of United States History says, (Vol. III., Page 106) "Turning northward with the remnant of his forces, he fought his way through the Chickasaw country, and reached the upper waters of the Yazoo River late in December, where he wintered in great distress. Moving westward in the spring, he discovered the Mississippi River in all its grandeur in May, 1541. It was near the lower Chickasaw Bluff in Tunica County, Mississippi." In the history of the United States by Dr. Edward Channing, Professor of History in Harvard University, (Vol. I., Page 73), a map is given which fixes the place of discovery about 20 miles below the 35th parallel in Tunica County. These works have both been issued since the painstaking and scholarly study of the DeSoto route of Professor Theodore Hayes Lewis, quoted in my first article. In Larned's "History for Ready Reference," (Vol. II, Page 1178) it is stated that "At length, in the third year of their journeying, they reached the banks of the Mississippi, 132 years before its second (or third?) discovery by Marquette \* \* \* The Spaniards passed over to a point above the mouth of the Arkansas." Dr. Edward Gaylord Bourne in his "Spain in America," gives a map at page 134, which places the crossing in

Tunica County, Mississippi. Belknap and Ellicott, referred to above, place the passage and discovery within the 34th parallel. And finally, Professor Lewis, in his study of every phase of the subject and every mile of the route as given in the publications of the Mississippi Historical Society, (Vol. VI., Pages 449—467), quoted at length in a former paper, fixes the discovery at Willow Point, in Tunica County, Mississippi. And let me repeat my assertion that the open-minded investigator cannot study his wonderful presentation of the subject without complete agreement with his conclusions.

I believe that it is not over-stating the case to claim that the following contentions have been established by this and my first paper:

First: That the best evidence of the De Soto route establishes the fact that, from April 30 to May 8, 1541, it was through the low lands of the Mississippi Delta and not through the high lands of North Mississippi and West Tennessee.

Second: That the topography of the country, as described in the narratives up to the very day of the discovery of the river, confirms the contention that it was made in the midst of a low country, abounding in marshes, lakes and sluggish streams.

Third: That the maps of the route of De Soto all give the point of the discovery and crossing within the 34th parallel.

Fourth: That the best and most accurate commentators on the subject place the point of discovery and crossing between the mouth of the Arkansas River and the 35th parallel.

Fifth: That the preponderence of evidence gathered from both original and secondary sources, establishes the contention that Tunica County, Mississippi, was the scene of the discovery and crossing of the Mississippi River, May 8, 1541, by Hernando De Soto.











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